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The Shunammite and her Son.

A SERMON,

PREACHED IN SAINT PETER'S CHURCH, COBOURG,

ON SUNDAY, XXVI. SEPTEMBER, M.DCCC.XLVII.

BY

A. N. BETHUNE, D.D.

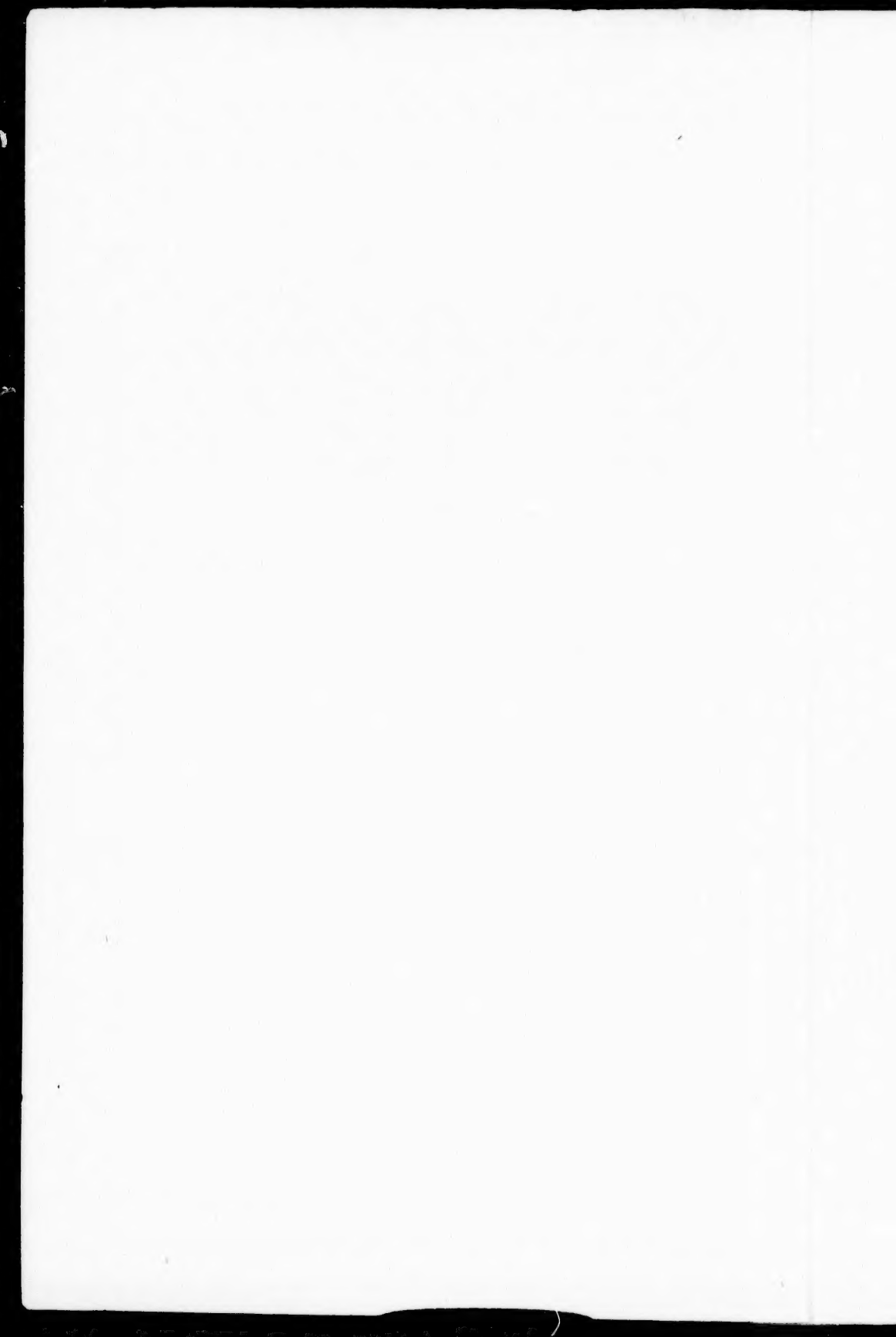
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TO

The Congregation of Saint Peter's Church,
COBOURG,

THE FOLLOWING SERMON,

PREACHED ON AN OCCASION

TO WHICH THE SACREDNESS OF PRIVATE SORROW

FORBIDS A FORMAL REFERENCE,

AND PUBLISHED AT THE REQUEST OF

SEVERAL MEMBERS OF THAT

CONGREGATION,

IN THE HUMBLE HOPE AND PRAYER

THAT THEIR EXPECTATIONS OF USEFULNESS

FROM ITS MORE EXTENDED CIRCULATION,

MAY NOT BE DISAPPOINTED,

IS AFFECTIONATELY INSCRIBED,

BY

THEIR FAITHFUL FRIEND AND PASTOR.

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The Shunammite and her Son.

A SERMON.

2 KINGS iv., 18, 19, 20.—“ And when the child was grown, it fell on a day, that he went out to his father to the reapers. And he said unto his father, My head, my head. And he said to a lad, Carry him to his mother. And when he had taken him, and brought him to his mother, he sat on her knees till noon, and then died.”

ONE great beauty and excellence of the Scripture narratives which all of us, my brethren, must have felt, is their remarkable adaptation to the ordinary circumstances of life. They are no studiously wrought, fictitious tales, designed to awaken a momentary interest or gratify a passing curiosity; but they are plain, touching stories of actual life, indited in days of great simplicity, when the heart spoke out its joys or sorrows without warp or fetter from artificial customs,—so that their unadorned and genuine lessons can reach, and edify, and comfort the spirit of man in every age,—humble him and teach him submission in his hour of prosperity and pride, and soothe and cheer him in his days of sadness and mourning.

Not one of the least touching and instructive of such narratives is that which the text brings to view,—the short, but interesting history of the Shunammite and her son. An important personage in the story is the illustrious prophet Elisha. He, in his journeyings through the land of Israel in the execution of high and important duties, came to Shunem, a city in the tribe of Issachar, where was a woman of great substance, rich, and abounding in the good things of this world. But although thus blessed as to temporal possessions, she was not, as the narrative shews, without thought and anxiety for

the better treasures of a better world. She knew, too, the value of Israel's distinguished prophet, and sought to benefit by his bright example and his holy counsels. She constrained him, therefore, to accept her hospitality; and, not content with a passing visit from the "man of God," she provided for him within her abode a permanent resting-place,—she annexed to her dwelling a "prophet's chamber," where, as often as he passed, he might stop and refresh himself, and, as the pious Shunammite believed, bring a blessing upon her house.

It is comforting, my brethren, to feel that, even in these artificial and unbelieving days, we are not without marked and refreshing examples of hospitality and honour to the servants and ambassadors of the Lord. It is cheering to discover that they, in their necessary journeyings, find many to welcome and befriend them,—many to help them on their way, and smooth to them the often rugged path of duty. And this is the more gladdening and acceptable as a test of the believer's love,—the evidence of a desire to gain the blessing of the prophet's prayers, and ensure from the prophet's God the protection, strength, and grace which only God can give.

Such was the motive, and such the recompence to the woman of Shunem. Elisha, moved by her regard and kindness, sends to her, and says, "Behold, thou hast been careful for us with all this care; what is to be done for thee? Wouldest thou be spoken for to the king or the captain of the host?" Was there, in short, any favour or advantage which he, from his influence in the highest places, could gain for her?—Her answer is remarkable and instructive, "I dwell among mine own people." And happier there than in the circles of the rich, or the palaces of the great. Dearer to her were the walls and dwellings of her own little town than the glare and grandeur of the far off courtly city: dearer her native hills and vallies than the furbished scenery of pomp and wealth: dearer far the society of the kinsfolk and friends of early years, than the bustle and pageantry of a crowd who knew her not and cared not for her. No, her heart is set

upon her childhood's home; nor will she, for any dazzling dream of ambition, part with the sunny spot where her purest and happiest days have been spent. She can leave to their nothingness the visions conjured up by the mention of "the king" and "the captain of the host," interceded with by so powerful a pleader as Elisha; and, in an honest and humble appreciation of God's past bounties, she is content to "dwell among her own people."

But there is a blank in her home where yet the sympathies and the might of the prophet can reach her: there was no child there, to inherit her fortunes or transmit her name.—That was a boon which probably she believed that God in his wisdom had decreed to withhold; and though there may have been many secret yearnings of the heart for the priceless treasure, it had been denied so long that she perhaps had ceased to touch upon it even in her prayers. But the richest blessings, like the heaviest trials, come often when they are least anticipated. The prophet prayed to God, and the child was granted.

There were bright and happy years after that. The child grew in stature and in wisdom, and, under the prophet's tuition, we can believe also in piety, grace, and goodness. About that cherished plant, so emphatically of the Lord's planting, there was all that was beautiful and engaging. He was the pride of the Shunammite's house; and it can be believed that the great Elisha felt towards him more than the love and interest of a spiritual father.

But perhaps in the parents' contemplation of his growing ripeness and beauty, there were some minglings of the alloy of this world. The soul, from its becoming sense of joy and thankfulness to God, may have slidden into a secret idolatry; and, in the many speculations of a fond yet wayward heart, there may have been an occasional momentary forgetfulness that what was man's treasure was also God's gift.

The heart is made better when, by a chastening from heaven, it is assured of this error. The little son of the

Shunammite, in an unexpected hour, is cut off in the midst of his sports and playfulness. The flower, in the fulness of its bloom and beauty, is severed at a stroke: there is no premonitory languor, no gradual decay; but in an instant, at one sweep of the destroyer, the fair plant is prostrated and dies. But few cries escape the sweet sufferer; the low, faint moaning is soon hushed in death. The assiduities of maternal care avail not; the appliances of medical skill cannot avert the blight of the death-stroke. Lingered, where in health and strength and playfulness he loved most to linger, he sighs his life away upon his mother's knees.

We shall not, my brethren, calculate upon all the sorrow of this Shunammite woman. If the fountains of grief were broken up,—if her tears flowed fresh and fast,—if the heart beat heavily in its distress, was there not a cause? But her faith forsook her not, though grief oppressed her: she remembered whence the treasure was gained, and she looked back, in the might of her confidence, to the all-powerful and merciful Giver. Not stopping to ease her full heart by the outpourings of a natural sorrow, she flies to the prophet, that she may gain, through his intercession, what she was too mean and unworthy to solicit directly herself.

And even to the man of God this was an unexpected blow. He, perhaps, in his hopes and aspirations for that fair child, the special gift of the Almighty, may have had his spiritual feelings marred and clouded: his thoughts may have travelled on to "the king" and "the captain of the host," in connection with the prospects of this cherished son of the Shunammite; and possibly the glitter and prosperity of the world may, in his high-wrought wishes and expectations, have gained some occasional precedence over the gifts and graces of a child of God. So he, too, was made to feel the peril of an earth-stained heart; and the agony of a mysterious delay was interposed, before he could prevail with God for the restoration of this departed child.

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Delay, however, in the bestowal of supplicated blessings is designed to render the spirit more trustful and patient,—not to break or crush it in despair of a peaceful answer from the mercy-seat. We have but to persevere in order to succeed; we have but to wrestle on to gain the blessing. The prophet prayed, and struggled in prayer; and at last,—his petition granted to the full,—he was enabled to say to the woman of Shunem, “Take up thy son.”

We can understand, my brethren, the effect of this change in the lately lone and sad house of the Shunammite; how a calm and chastened joy and thankfulness took the place of the melancholy and desolation which so recently had reigned there. But perhaps, in making a personal application of it, there may be a sinking of the heart in contemplating the utter hopelessness of ourselves experiencing a similar change. No prophet’s staff, no prophet’s prayers can now bring life to the departed; and when we gaze upon the cut-off flower of promise, there would be presumption in the hope that God, through any human intercession, would yield it back again to cheer and bless us. But if we do not live in the days of miracle, we live in days of promise. By and by, in God’s good time, there will be this restoration of the dead to life: we have the Saviour’s words, the Saviour’s works, to assure us of it.—More than once, to alleviate the breaking heart and rouse the spirit bowed too deeply down, our compassionate Redeemer, by a single word of power, called back the dead to life; and lest his own soul-cheering promise, “I am the resurrection and the life, whosoever believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live,”—lest this should fail of all its comfort to the bereaved and mourning, He himself broke from the strong grasp of this destroyer, and proclaimed, for the assurance and consolation of every age till “time shall be no more,” the completeness of his victory over this “last enemy.” So then of the departed we may say, in his own heart-soothing words, “She is not dead, but sleepeth.”

And if, brethren, there should be interposed between this promise and its fulfilment what we, in our weakness, might count a wearying delay, it is to us a wise and profitable remembrancer of our pilgrim state. God is patient and long-suffering with us; and we need a more awakening lesson often than the counsels of his written word to teach us patience also. It is well thus to learn to live more by faith and less by sight; to refer our hopes and destiny with a more child-like temper of submission to the will of God; to shew less of self-seeking and self-pleasing; to be, in view of our Creator and Redeemer, more confiding, trustful, and dependent.

And was the Shunammite wise in seeking so early,—so prematurely, we may almost say,—the realization of the never-failing promises of God? Was she wise in asking back the withdrawn treasure of her precious child, before the morning of that glorious day, when, at the summons of the Archangel's trumpet, earth and sea should yield up their dead,—the righteous and faithful to be clothed then with pure and imperishable bodies? Was it wise to wish to snatch him back, just as the brightness of the paradise of God was breaking on his view, and he was catching the first entrancing echoes of the angels' never-ending song? Was it wise to ask an exchange for him from brightness and peace and bliss like this, to wander once more a pilgrim and a stranger on the dull, polluted soil of earth? And what peril was there, too, in that exchange! There must grow on, with childhood's growth to youth and thence to maturity of manhood, the strong and evil passions of our fallen nature,—the fiercer conflict with a wicked and a tempting world,—the harder struggle with a wayward heart within, the stronger contest with unnumbered foes without. And then there may have been the fall from affluence and comfort to poverty and woe,—persecutions, perhaps, from kings and captains of the host, lurking, worse than all, to Baal's idol-worship,—captivity, perchance, and its thousand trials, with haughty conquerors of the land,—a separation, worse than death, between child and mother,—

disease and all its complicated wretchedness in a far off, hostile country,—the failing frame, the sinking energies, life's sad decline, and death at last,—all these were woes which possibly a re-entrance into life brought on. O better far, then, to leave in the bosom of his Father and his God the dear child of promise which He, in very mercy, had taken to himself: better there, secure in that boundless love, than to be buffeted on by life's dangerous storms: happier in that refuge of peace than in the warm, though weak, protection of the most loving and devoted upon earth.

But, my brethren, in our acknowledged consolations under God's severest chastenings, let us not be unmindful that there is a pilgrimage and a warfare still before us,—that, come joy or sorrow, we are pledged to the work of the Lord's vineyard, and must not, in barren contemplation, stand still or idle.—Let, then, the history we have been reviewing teach us,—

I. The duty, according to the Divine command, of bringing up children in “the nurture and admonition of the Lord,” because that can be to us the only security that they will “die in the Lord.” God's own word provides how, from the first dawn of infancy, they may become his adopted children, and be assured of his grace and blessing: in that we are taught to bring them to Christ, to enroll them under his standard, to make them his soldiers and servants. By baptism they are introduced into the Lord's family, placed under his special protection, with a pledge and earnest of his imparted and continued grace. Never, then, let us forget the exalted nature of this high privilege; but strive by our lessons, our example, and our prayers, to keep them worthy members of that holy household,—to make their after-life consistent with that good beginning,—and so to train, and teach, and counsel them, that, when the work of this weary world has closed, they may be found on the Lord's side still, and, safe in his embrace and strong in his protection, may be wafted across death's gloomy river to the Canaan of everlasting rest and glory. Beware, my brethren, in the worldliness and selfishness of a much

tempted heart, of ever losing sight of this their high heritage and heavenly destiny. Look with a wary eye across the thorns and perils of the world, and keep a steadfast view of the eternity beyond. Remember that every child is an heir of immortality, and for that changeless, boundless existence train them up. Look, with a Christian's dutiful indifference, upon the vanities and follies, the pomps and pleasures of the world, on which so great a stress is alas! too widely laid. To these toys and trifles of the hour assign their proper place; the business of the Christian life, the aspiring after heaven, the contest for the crown of glory, forbids a devotion of the soul to those mean and perishable vanities. God's law and will, the great atonement of the Saviour, knowledge of the truth in Jesus, man's native wickedness, the work of grace, and practical application of the Spirit's influences,—these are themes for the enlisted warrior of the cross; not the calculations for earthly aggrandizement,—not plans and schemes for wealth and greatness, for worldly show, for the hollow pomp of fleet and passing time. Let the kingdom of God within the heart, faith unflinching in the Saviour, the purity and peace of a godly and religious life, and the tranquil closing of the Christian warfare,—let this be the high purpose, the never-wearying toil, the constant prayer of every Christian parent for his child.

II. But there presses yet upon us, as an improvement from this review, another duty.—Who can look upon the gentle innocence of childhood,—exempted, as we must feel it by the merciful Providence of God, from the darker stains and harder sufferings of the world by the interposition of an early death,—who can look on this, and not feel that it is a counsel and a warning to remember the Saviour's solemn charge, "Except ye be converted and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven." Yes, even the most thoughtful, pains-taking, and religious may profit by this admonition; for at best we are too far off from the standard of purity and godliness which the word of God sets before us.—

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There are, even to the most advanced and most watchful, clogs and impediments in the course of duty,—hindrances great and distressing to the warmth, and earnestness, and singleness of devotion. We have an earthly nature, and too often the passions and pursuits of earth mingle with our aspirings heavenwards,—too often soil the purity of our secret communing with God, and defile our more public exercises of holy duty. May childhood's endearing example correct this earthliness of our nature,—may its simple guilelessness move us to greater singleness of purpose, to better purity of heart, in all we undertake and do; so that, through self-watching, diligence, and prayer, we may go on from strength to strength in the struggles of our warfare, and pursue the conflict with better assurance of victory in the end.

But, my brethren, the warning is more direct and startling to the careless liver, the almost Christian, the relaxing soldier of the cross,—to him who does his spiritual work with negligence and languor,—who has little taste for the things of God,—and who leaves undone, at the slightest pleading of a carnal heart's excuses, the service which a compassionate Father and Redeemer claims. He, in this cold indifference of a pledged servant of the Lord, is standing on most perilous ground, on the very edge of a precipice of ruin,—alienating Him whose favour is life,—grieving, quenching, expelling that blessed Spirit without whose quickening power our soul's energies must decline, our heart's devotion perish. Duty, interest, hope, and fear persuade him to gird anew the loins, to trim again the waning fires,—to be a Christian indeed,—to look off from earth and up to heaven,—to remember the latter end, the dread account, the judgment sentence, the doom of the unprofitable.

But, more than all, does it warn and counsel those who are living too flagrantly without God in the world,—hardly believing, and therefore little moved by, the mysterious truths of the heavenly revelations,—planning, and toiling for, the gratification only of a carnal, sensual nature,—the boundaries

of earth the limits of the heart's desires and cravings,—no look towards God or heaven but one of awe and trembling.—Poor, perishing sinner, it is time that you thought of God, and turned in penitence to Him; it is time that you gave up the devices and wickedness of the world, and looked for joy and peace above; it is time that you turned to the blood of the atonement, and sought, by genuine faith and true contrition, the peace of reconciliation with an offended God. And O delay not your efforts for this change of surpassing joy and comfort; resolve from this hour to dedicate yourselves again to God;—and let no mocking seductions of the unbelieving and the scoffer, no taunts nor jeers of the ungodly and blaspheming draw you off from the chosen path of duty; but follow on to know the Lord, till the Lord's peace, which passeth the world's best gifts and understanding, is fully and securely yours. Then, when you come to die, you may realize even childhood's sweet serenity, and, in the confidence of sin forgiven through the Saviour's all-sufficient merits, have the blest assurance that angels will convey you to the paradise of God.

And let all, the strong and earnest as well as the weak and doubting,—the patient and persevering, as well as the penitent in the first freshness of his tears and prayers,—repair for comfort, strength, and grace, to the Lord's holy ordinances,—to the banquet especially of his body and blood; where the spiritual food he proffers will bring refreshment to the weary and vigour to the fainting, and where his promised blessing at this feast of feasts will bless, and help, and purify all who come thither with a lively appreciation of his sacrifice for our sins and the heart's full purpose of amendment of life.*

* Preached on a Sunday upon which the Holy Sacrament of the Lord's Supper was administered.

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